

Christ the King Sunday

KING OF THE MOUNTAIN

Luke 23:33-43

Christ the King Sunday

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

33When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" 36The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." 39One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" 40But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." 42Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

DIAGNOSIS: Same Old, Same Old

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Always Excluding Jesus*

Let the whole world see what is happening: Jesus was removed from our society (that is, killed) because he refused to play our little game. As children we call the game king of the mountain. It is a scramble to the top of the heap and a struggle to stay there by removing anyone who gets in our way (by pushing or shoving them). By the mere act of exclusion, the game requires us to be violent towards others. As adults we call the game careers or some other grown-up euphemism. The game we play also applies to groups and to societies, without exception. We are all in gangs. Whether as families or as ethnic groups or as nations, we protect ourselves by excluding others. No one grows out of this game, ever. Whatever our little mountain is, whatever group we belong to, we will violently protect it. But Jesus lived differently. He refused to belong to, or to identify himself with, any group, even his own family group (Mk 3:33). And yet he did belong, he did identify with, a certain group: the group of excluded ones, the condemned (v. 41). Among these, he was by virtue of his innocence “king” of “the mountain” (The Skull, vv. 33, 38)-chief among those who are excluded (that is, murdered). Jesus’ absolute refusal to play our game is confirmed by his prayer for our forgiveness (v. 34) which is quintessentially non-violent and thus altogether creative. Tragically, even though we suspect that this game of ours is not really a game (how can it be, when it is a matter of life and death?), we keep playing it-and Jesus keeps being excluded.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *“We’re fallen, and we can’t get up!”*

The people “watched,” the leaders “scoffed,” the soldiers “mocked,” and one of the criminals “derided” Jesus (vv. 35-36, 39). Would we have done anything differently? No. We all play the same game. Why? Because violence is intrinsic to our very being. Metaphorically, it is deeply seated in our hearts. It is so deeply seated, in fact, that we don’t even notice it, though

it is all around us. We are in a “spiritual” stupor, as it were; drunk on violence. It seems that the only way we know to belong, to be accepted in our group, is to exclude others-even if that means excluding God. When put that way, our “fallen” nature reveals itself. Worse yet, there is nothing we can do about it. We can neither “work” our way out (the hole we are in just gets deeper), nor can we “pray” our way out (we don’t have the faith for it); it is simply not in our nature. Neither culture nor religion is any help. Ineluctably, we exclude Jesus at every turn. Our every act, our every sin as it must now be called, is against God, against Christ, against Jesus. Yes, against him and no one else!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Justly Condemned*

The two criminals, that is, the ones murdered along with Jesus, were “condemned justly” (v. 41) for their violence (external and internal) not only against society but against God. Because we, too, are also violent to the core, the condemnation of these criminals and sinners mirrors our own just condemnation. God himself condemns us! Even the second criminal was condemned justly. Every attempt to escape our sentence of death only results in greater condemnation. Nor can we escape our sin by foisting it upon another, especially in the name of religion. For religion (as exemplified in the text between the “people” and their “leaders”) serves to sanctify our violence and thus to hide it from us, and only digs our grave deeper. Let us understand the meaning of this: “The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17).

PROGNOSIS: Brave New World

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Peace with God*

When Jesus prayed that his excluder-killers be forgiven, he was referring to us. He was not singling out the ones who, two thousand years ago, excluded him by nailing him to a cross; nor

simply the ones who watched, or who scoffed, or who ran away in fear or in shame. Those, too! But chiefly Jesus was praying for our forgiveness. For, it is against Jesus himself that we have sinned. Therefore it is from Jesus himself that we must be forgiven. Although we always exclude Jesus, he never excludes us. Although we cannot foist our sin upon another, Jesus takes our sin upon himself and suffers its violent consequence “for us and for our salvation.” When Jesus said to the second criminal (the one who spoke the truth), “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (v. 43), he was promising nothing less than peace with God (24:36). Jesus’ innocent death and his resurrection to eternal life demonstrates, indeed establishes, the reality of our forgiveness by him-by God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting the King of the Mountain*

The “gospel” of our forgiveness by Jesus is just as personal and just as immediate and just as certain as it was for the first disciples in the Upper Room. Jesus himself forgives us for excluding him. It is this heart-rending recognition that makes our trust in him salvific. The One whom we excluded, the true king of the true mountain, saves us by including us in his life. Saved from our own violence and from the violence we expected of God, we are saved for authentic, prayerful life. Saved now, not merely later. Everything is different now, beginning with our relationship to God. Now we live in the truth (faith in Christ) rather than living in a lie (faith in ourselves).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Brave New World*

And now the world is different, too. It now belongs to Jesus, the new and everlasting king of the mountain (an ancient title for Christ is Pantocrator, Upholder of the World). The world belongs to those who, like Jesus, have no need for violence or lies. Now, forgiveness is a way of life. No need to push others out of the way, no need to play king of the mountain. There is

no mountain that can be climbed with violence. Instead, "Love your enemies . . . Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (6:35-36). Let "faith in Christ" be enough for you; love one another. Resist the urge to form exclusive groups! Although there is only one among us who can truly forgive, insofar as it is possible for you (for we are still sinners) include yourself among the excluded-it is the only group that has a future! Be truthful. Do not judge anyone for anything unless you also judge yourself for exactly the same thing. Be brave, even unto death, for then God will have the last word. For God will have the last word!